

Fostering Brilliance

*Systematizing Gifted and Talented Education in
Massachusetts*

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Executive Summary

Programming for gifted and talented elementary and secondary students, or students with marked intellectual, academic, or creative ability, in Massachusetts is haphazard: there are no centralized guidelines from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) for school districts to identify and serve these students. This brief intends to address this gap by offering potential strategies for DESE and school districts to develop systematic policies for the provision of gifted and talented education.

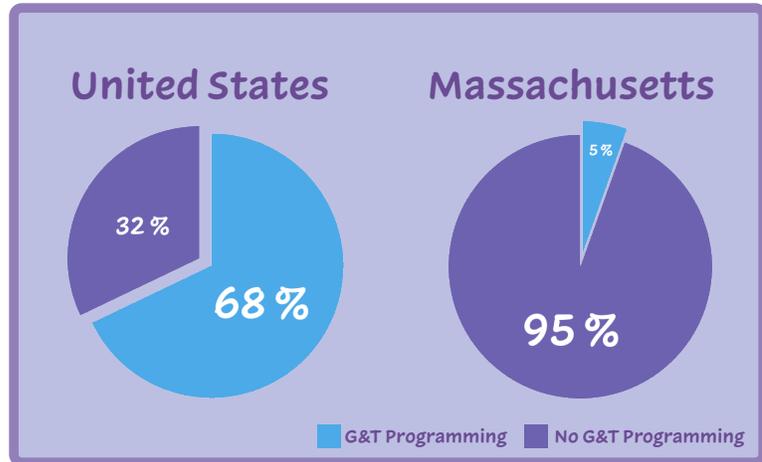
As a distinct population of students with educational needs that vary from their typically developing counterparts, gifted and talented students require support that is currently not available in many Massachusetts schools. Some schools have programs for high-achieving students, but many gifted and talented students may not earn high grades in the classroom because of boredom, disengagement, or a disability. Furthermore, Black and Latino students are less likely to be identified as gifted and talented because of systemic racial bias and identification techniques that do not take into account racial disparities in educational outcomes. While there is a common misconception that very intelligent or creative students will manage on their own without adaptive education, this is untrue. The consequences of not meeting these students' educational needs can be dire. Denying these students an education commensurate with their skills can lead to disengagement from the classroom, failing grades, an elevated risk of dropout, and other detrimental outcomes.

DESE should develop a systematic set of guidelines for assessing and serving gifted and talented students in the Commonwealth, including provisions for identification, assessment, and service provision for these students to ensure that they can receive an enriching, challenging education that allows them to thrive both in the classroom and in adult life after leaving the school system. DESE should root this rubric for gifted and talented assessment and services in principles of equity, inclusion, and educational needs to ensure that all students who will benefit from gifted and talented education receive the chance to participate. These guidelines include assessment procedures that consider multiple facets of intellectual and creative giftedness, universal giftedness screening, protocols for grade-skipping and other forms of acceleration, and comprehensive educational planning for gifted and talented students.

Introduction

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) currently has no systematic policy for implementing gifted and talented (G&T) programming within its schools, despite the existence of a regulation defining this population and a Board of Education committee geared

Elementary & Middle Schools with G&T Programming



Yaluma & Tyner, 2018

toward addressing G&T students' needs (Chester, 2017). While there are indeed programs in place in Massachusetts to serve this population, the way in which these programs are distributed is haphazard and varies greatly from district to district, or are subject-specific, like the Massachusetts Academy of Math and Science (Chester, 2017). Furthermore, many districts do not even provide a gifted and talented program in the first place; as of January 2018, only 5.3% of Massachusetts elementary and



Silverman, 2013; NAGC, 2016

middle schools have one of these programs, in comparison to the national average of 68.3% (Yaluma & Tyner, 2018). G&T students are a distinct population. Roughly 2% to 10% of students within a given school or district, or 20 to 100 students in a 1,000-student school, require additional educational support to reach their highest potential

(Silverman, 2013; NAGC, 2016). These students exhibit intellectual, creative, and artistic talents that set them apart from the general student population; these differences necessitate differentiated education to ensure that they are able to not only survive in school, but thrive. While Massachusetts formerly had funding and specific programming set aside for this population, there has been no funding or enforcement since 2002 (Chester, 2017).

Although many educators and policymakers may associate adaptive education with the needs of students with disabilities, this principle *also applies to gifted and talented students*, whether or not they also have a disability. Like students with disabilities, G&T students have needs that may not be adequately met in the general-education classroom alone. The general-education curriculum is primarily geared toward the 80% to 95% of students who are of average or slightly above- or below-average intellectual or creative ability (Silverman, 2013). While this model works relatively well for its intended population, it is less effective for students whose educational needs vary from the norm to a degree that would prevent them from deriving the optimal benefit from classroom instruction.

Without a systematic framework in place for schools and school districts to identify and serve G&T students, students in districts without any specific policies, or with vague policies, for this population may find themselves languishing in classrooms that are neither intellectually or creatively stimulating. We can apply the principle of free and appropriate education (FAPE), drawn from the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, to G&T students, although IDEA does not apply legally to gifted and talented students unless they have a qualifying disability that would allow them to receive IDEA services.

Just because a student is highly creative or intelligent does not mean that they can thrive on their own. Forcing a student who knows how to read fluently before kindergarten to learn how to identify letters is not an appropriate education for that child. A student who reads at an adult level in the fifth grade and can understand complex mathematical concepts is unlikely to thrive if they are given a standard fifth-grade curriculum that focuses on multiplication, fractions, and the difference between an adverb and a pronoun; the same

applies to a student who composes music with great facility but is forced to learn how to read sheet music. G&T students often prefer to learn new material as opposed to repeating the same content over and over again (Gross, “Understanding Giftedness”; Prober, 2016). School curricula geared toward the average child use large amounts of repetition and practice to reinforce skills; G&T students are more likely to remember a fact after a few repetitions and do not benefit from the same amount of review as do other students (Gross, “Understanding Giftedness”). The further a student is from the norm, the more difficult it will be for them to tolerate the pace of the standard curriculum (Tolan, 2016). Under Massachusetts law, it is the responsibility of schools to provide an appropriate education for *all* students (Ferrick, 2015). A curriculum that does not allow a student to learn new material is not an appropriate education. Ensuring that gifted and talented students receive instruction that meets their educational needs is in keeping with that law, even if the state does not specifically mandate gifted and talented programming.

Since gifted and talented students are a distinct group of students that requires modifications to the standard curriculum to have an appropriate education, it is in the best interests of DESE to encourage school districts and individual schools to identify and accommodate these students. Whether or not the Massachusetts Legislature enshrines these recommendations into law, DESE could create a series of non-binding, but highly encouraged, guidelines for school districts, or individual school districts could create their own informal recommendations and harmonize their policies with one another to ensure that there is a reasonable degree of consistency between school districts’ policies.

Toward that end, this brief:

- Provides a **review of the literature on differentiated instruction** for gifted and talented learners.
- Provides **examples of state and federal policies** designed to benefit G&T learners, along with their implementation strategies.

- Includes **information on various principles, strategies, and issues** related to gifted education, including equitable selection criteria, educational options for G&T students, and the consequences of not meeting G&T students' needs.
- Offers a list of **potential policy solutions** for DESE and school districts to systematize gifted and talented education.
- Offers a **final set of recommendations** for a more systematic approach to gifted and talented education in Massachusetts for DESE to consider and implement.

Theoretical background: definitions, educational consequences, equity issues, state and federal policy, principles of identification, and strategies for teaching G&T students

Definitions

What does “gifted and talented” mean, anyway?

Different organizations serving G&T students have somewhat different definitions of this group of students; however, one common theme is the presence of intellectual or creative ability distinctly beyond that of typically developing age-peers (NAGC, “What is Giftedness?”; Council for Exceptional Children, 2018; Silverman, 2013). These abilities can occur in a single domain, like art, music, or mathematics, or in multiple domains (NAGC, “What is Giftedness?”). The National Association for Gifted Children (2016), or NAGC, characterizes gifted and talented students as those who perform above the norm for their age in intellectual, creative, or leadership domains. Similarly, the Council for Exceptional Children (2018) uses the definition used in federal law (Wright & Wright, 2015) and views gifted and talented students as “students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities.”

In the early 1990s, the Columbus Group, a collective of researchers and educators specializing in the education of intellectually gifted children and adolescents, developed a model of intellectual advancement called *asynchronous development* (Tolan, 2016). Children who develop asynchronously differ experientially, intellectually, and emotionally from intellectually typical children. They learn more quickly than their peers, sometimes gaining knowledge on a par with adults far before their peers (Tolan, 2016). Their social and emotional development may be more or less advanced than their age-peers. Similarly, students with intellectual disabilities can also be out of sync, developing more quickly physically or emotionally than they do intellectually. While the Columbus Group developed this model to refer specifically to *intellectually* gifted children and teenagers, one can still extrapolate the underlying principle to students whose gifts lie in other areas. A student whose ability to create and appreciate art or music, for example, may also be out of sync with more typically developing age peers. Their atypical development gives them qualitative differences from more typically developing peers, necessitating intellectual, emotional, and social support that dovetails well with their developmental needs. In contrast to G&T students and students with intellectual or neurodevelopmental disabilities, typically developing children tend to develop more synchronously.

Educational consequences

Imagine that someone is running in a race at top speed, only to slam face-first into a wall a few feet away from them not long after they have started running. Similarly, gifted and talented students may hit a metaphorical wall if they are forced to remain in lockstep with their age-peers without any differential instruction. After they hit this wall, they may lose interest in school if they feel they are not learning, leading to school failure, a higher risk of dropout, and the loss of significant intellectual and creative potential. The effects that G&T students experience if they are not provided an appropriate education are similar to those that non-G&T students with a disability experience. The risks are especially pronounced if a

student is both intellectually or creatively gifted and has a co-occurring disability (Silverman, 2013).

The failure to meet the educational needs of gifted and talented students has both personal and societal consequences. On a personal level, G&T students whose schools do not meet their educational needs are at a greater risk for school dropout and depression (Ferrick 2015). Most tragically, this disengagement may lead to an increased risk of suicide (Ferrick, 2015; Prober, 2016). From a larger-scale social perspective, a lack of appropriate education for G&T students can result in vacancies for jobs that require significant technical skill, like engineering and technology positions (Ferrick, 2015). US citizens earned just over half of physical science doctoral degrees and just under half of engineering doctorates awarded in the country, meaning that employers frequently have to hire talented workers from abroad to fill sorely needed positions (Ferrick, 2015). Gifted and talented children grow into gifted and talented adults; the consequences of an inadequate education are not limited to a person's schooldays (Tolan, 2016). Providing education that meets the needs of very creative or intelligent students produces lifelong dividends.

Equity issues affecting gifted and talented students

Giftedness is not restricted to white, upper-middle-class and upper-class students without disabilities. Students of all races and socioeconomic statuses can, and do, exhibit strong intellectual and creative abilities, as can students with disabilities (Woods, 2016; Wright & Wright, 2015). Despite this, however, low-income students and students from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups from across the United States are 250% less

In the US, low-income students and students from underrepresented racial groups are

250%

less likely to be selected for or participate in gifted and talented programming

likely to participate in gifted programs or to be identified for them (Knudsen, 2018). In identifying and serving gifted and talented students, it is paramount that policymakers, school districts, and individual schools ensure the equitable treatment of students from marginalized communities. A gifted and talented program that continues to replicate entrenched societal biases outside the classroom will shortchange the intellectual and creative needs of G&T students from underrepresented communities and worsen the achievement gap that already exists between marginalized students and those from more privileged or advantaged communities (Yaluma & Tyner, 2018; Woods, 2016). DESE and school districts must therefore build concerns about equity and inclusion into a potential model for systematizing gifted education in Massachusetts into their criteria from the beginning to prevent the tragic consequences of lost student potential.

Students with disabilities. Contrary to popular misconception, marked intellectual or creative ability and a disability can coexist in the same student (Wright & Wright, 2015). These disabilities include dyscalculia, dyslexia, autism spectrum conditions, ADHD, and any other disability that affects educational outcomes apart from intellectual disability. G&T students with disabilities are often called “twice-exceptional” or “2e” (Wright & Wright, 2015). Schools should not use a student’s eligibility for an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or Section 504 Plan to exclude them from participating in gifted educational programming (Wright & Wright, 2015). Strengths-based models have proven effective in educating all students with disabilities, whether or not they are also G&T; this model is even more important for those students whose intellectual or creative talents are distinct enough from the general student population to merit specialized instruction (NAGC, “Ensuring that Gifted Children with Disabilities Receive Appropriate Services”).

Models of giftedness that focus on classroom achievement shortchange the intellectual and creative needs of G&T students who have co-occurring disabilities. Students who use their intelligence or creative abilities to compensate for relative weaknesses may still be able to pass their classes and make it more difficult for teachers and school administrators

to identify their need for further educational support (Silverman, 2013; NAGC, “Ensuring Gifted Children with Disabilities Receive Appropriate Services”). That said, however, while compensation techniques may help G&T students with disabilities for several years, some of them may no longer be able to use these compensation skills after encountering classes that require more of them than their previous classes did (NAGC, “Ensuring Gifted Children with Disabilities Receive Appropriate Services”). Furthermore, if school officials do not identify students’ disabilities and help them devise coping strategies to improve their academic performance, G&T students with disabilities may start to fail their classes or earn lower scores on high-stakes achievement tests or college admissions tests like the SAT and ACT relative to their intellectual or creative ability (Silverman, 2013).

Black and Latino students. A model of gifted identification that focuses primarily on academic achievement instead of intellectual or creative potential can also lead to under-identification of Black and Latino G&T students; the same applies to standards that focus primarily on standardized intelligence or achievement testing (Woods, 2016). Black and Latino students are more likely to be taught by less experienced teachers, negatively affecting their academic performance (Woods, 2016). Teachers may be less likely to nominate Black and Latino students for inclusion in gifted and talented programs because of unwarranted racial stereotypes about the intelligence of these racial and ethnic groups; for example, non-Black teachers were less likely to identify Black students as potential candidates for G&T programs (Woods, 2016). Though intellectual and creative giftedness cut across racial boundaries, white and Asian students are disproportionately more likely to be identified for, and participate in, G&T programming compared to Black and Latino students (Woods, 2016). Even when Black and Latino students are correctly identified as being gifted and talented, further inequities can occur. In a particularly egregious case, a school district in Illinois placed Latino students in a separate gifted program from students of other races, even though most of these Latino students were proficient English-speakers (Zeigler, 2012).

Low- and moderate-income students. Like G&T Black and Latino students and students with disabilities, low- and moderate-income students face significant disparities in access to gifted and talented education provision (Woods, 2016). Low-income students are less likely than middle-class and upper-middle classes to be identified as gifted and talented (Woods, 2016). The use of local property taxes to provide a portion of schools' funding in Massachusetts compounds this problem. A school district in a relatively affluent area is in a better position to provide comprehensive G&T education than one in a low- or moderate-income region. One could argue that it is parents' responsibility to provide further intellectual or creative enrichment to students who do not receive it at school, but that may not be the case for low-income parents who do not have the time or money to devote to additional education for their children. Those parents who can afford extra enrichment will provide it for their children, but students whose parents who cannot will be at a disadvantage. Furthermore, it is the requirement of schools to provide students with an education that meets their educational needs to prepare them for the exigencies of adult life (Ferrick, 2015).

State and federal policies

What are Massachusetts' policies?

In 2002, DESE produced a policy brief delineating strategies to boost gifted and talented education in the Commonwealth. Sixteen years after DESE's report, very little has changed (Chester, 2017). Though state law mandates that a commission for gifted and talented education must convene throughout the year, this commission's recommendations are not necessarily binding (Chester, 2017). This means that there is no systematic state-level policy from which school districts can refer to develop or implement gifted and talented programs.

Some districts do have methods for providing students with more advanced educational material, but the methods vary from district to district in the absence of

statewide guidance from DESE. In a survey of 117 Massachusetts school superintendents and charter-school leaders, DESE (2017) found that schools used a number of different techniques to provide for the needs of students performing above grade level. Elementary students were most likely to receive support through academic enrichment, mostly in the form of personalized learning approaches and after-school enrichment programs, whereas middle- and high-school students were more likely to be accelerated in specific subjects.

Unfortunately, the districts that responded to this survey were far less likely to have programs for creatively gifted students: only 57% of schools offered programming for creatively or athletically talented students, and these programs were not G&T specific (DESE, 2017). There are, however, limitations to this survey; only 29% of all 404 Massachusetts charter-school leaders and superintendents responded (DESE, 2017). Moreover, the survey did not indicate the degree to which students performed above grade level; the needs of a third-grader who does fourth-grade work would be different from those of a third-grader who does twelfth-grade work. Furthermore, these programs were not official gifted and talented programs, but programs geared toward high achievers. While there is overlap between giftedness and high achievement, they are not synonymous. A very intelligent or creative student who is not earning high grades because of disengagement or a disability may not be identified for one of these programs in the first place. New guidelines for G&T provision must differentiate between students' intellectual or creative needs and their classroom achievement as measured by grades or standardized-test scores.

What are other states' systematic policies?

Some other states have clear, state-level policies that recognize G&T students' educational needs. In Pennsylvania, G&T students are given Gifted Individual Education Plans, analogous to the Individualized Education Plans used by students with disabilities under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (Ferrick, 2015). Connecticut, too, uses a similar model to accommodate the educational needs of highly intelligent or creative students, including these students under the state's special-education statutes (Ferrick,

2015). The common theme among these laws is the recognition that G&T students, like students with disabilities, are an exceptional population that diverge enough from the norm to receive specialized instruction. Drawing from the principle of “free and appropriate education” (FAPE), these states use systems by which students with additional educational needs can receive a public education that reflects their intellectual or creative abilities. While intellectual giftedness or creative talent are not disabilities in the same sense that autism, dyslexia, cerebral palsy, or blindness are, extreme intellectual and creative ability still render the general-education curriculum inadequate to suit their needs.

What federal legislation applies to this population?

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Introduced as a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Act at the beginning of the George W. Bush administration, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 mandated that schools adhere to strictly defined federal standards that were primarily predicated on students’ abilities to pass state-mandated standardized achievement tests. These standards are based on strictly defined, age-based grade levels. In 2015, Congress reauthorized No Child Left Behind in the form of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) during Barack Obama’s administration (Nelson, 2015; NAGC, 2016). Like NCLB, ESSA uses high-stakes standardized testing to determine students’ levels of achievement; however, unlike the original NCLB, states have more latitude to set their own standards for student achievement (Nelson, 2015). Unfortunately, the impetus for schools to “teach to the test” under these laws has proved detrimental to the learning of students with exceptional learning needs (Davidson Institute for Talent Development, 2006).

ESSA defines gifted and talented students as those “who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities,” but does not provide for national enforcement, leaving the matter up to state and local governments (Wright & Wright, 2015).

While many states do have gifted and talented mandates, this does not apply to Massachusetts; it is the responsibility of DESE or the state legislature to ensure that G&T students receive an education tailored to their intellectual, artistic, or creative needs.

Principles of G&T Identification and Implementation: needs-based models, identification strategies, and educational options

Needs, not achievement

It is important to remember that serving G&T students should be based on needs, rather than achievement. The Gifted and Talented Advisory Committee of the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education has advised a shift toward identifying and serving G&T students who may not be earning high grades in the classroom, but show high intellectual or creative potential elsewhere, alongside their high-achieving counterparts (Chester, 2017). An achievement-centric model presents a number of problems that may hinder schools' efforts to identify and serve students who require more challenging material; a highly intelligent or creative student who is not challenged in school may earn low grades owing to their lack of interest in the subject matter, even if they are able to understand the material. While achievement is indeed important, there are many G&T students who do not thrive in the traditional school setting for a number of reasons; for one, the lack of academic challenge may bore them and cause them to disengage from the material in the standard curriculum (Prober, 2016; Chester, 2017). Intellectual and creative aptitudes are ingrained abilities that may or may not result in tangible achievements in later life; to increase the likelihood that G&T students will use their talents to benefit the rest of society, it is imperative to nurture their intellectual and creative development.

Unfortunately, Massachusetts schools are most likely to use achievement-centric methods to identify and serve gifted students. According to the DESE (2017) report, Massachusetts schools are most likely to identify gifted students using classroom grades (70% of respondents) and teacher recommendations (75% of respondents). Teacher

recommendations can be beneficial if a teacher recognizes the discrepancy between a student's aptitude and their classroom grades, but they can be detrimental if teachers rely solely on grades as a method for identifying intellectual or creative giftedness. Using grades can prove problematic for those students who are disengaged from the learning process if schools do not provide them with material on their own level. Comparatively fewer schools—roughly 25 to 33%—used other identification criteria like benchmark assessments, parent recommendations, previous participation in programs for academically talented students, and assessments of academic knowledge (DESE, 2017). Very few schools use intelligence tests, and those that do couple those assessments with achievement-test scores (Ferrick, 2015). Achievement-centric models of giftedness are less likely to identify highly intelligent or creative students who are underachieving, have learning disabilities, are Black or Latino, or are low-income (Silverman, 2013). To meet the needs of all gifted and talented students in Massachusetts, statewide guidelines should ensure that identification techniques are equitable.

Identification and assessment

There should be a clear, systematic process by which schools identify G&T students for differentiated instruction or enrichment. School psychologists, teachers and other faculty and staff who work directly with students should receive training on the identification and support of G&T students. Generally, identification for gifted education can include the following components:

- *Quantitative measurement.*
- *Academic assessment.*
- *Qualitative measurement.*
- *Parent, teacher, administrator, or self-nomination.*

Quantitative measurement primarily applies to intellectually gifted students; this form of measurement consists of intelligence tests and standardized achievement tests. The designers of the Wechsler family of intelligence tests consider scores above 130 to be in the

gifted range, whereas the makers of the Stanford-Binet test consider scores above 120 to be in this range (Silverman, 2013). There are, of course, important concerns regarding the use of IQ and achievement tests to identify high-ability students. While intelligence tests like the Wechsler and Stanford-Binet scales are useful in identifying most intellectually gifted students, these tests can still produce false negatives and fail to identify some highly intelligent students for whom traditional intelligence tests are inaccessible, or against whom these tests are biased (Silverman, 2013). For example, a student whose reading, language, and science ability is advanced, but has dyscalculia or another disability that affects their ability to do mathematics, may have their overall IQ score fall below the gifted range or perform at an average- or below-average level on a mathematics achievement test, but have outstanding subtest scores in areas related to language, reading, and visual pattern recognition (Silverman, 2013). The Wechsler intelligence tests include subtests that are highly dependent on working memory and fine-motor skills; students with disabilities that adversely affect these skills may have artificially depressed IQ scores. Group-administered intelligence tests like the Otis-Lennon test are less effective in identifying high-ability students than are individually administered tests (Silverman, 2013). While Massachusetts schools do not primarily use cognitive testing to determine students' eligibility for gifted programming, it may be useful to identify students who show signs of intellectual advancement outside the classroom, but underachieve within it (Ferrick, 2015). Unfortunately, Quincy, one of the few Massachusetts school districts that does use cognitive testing as one of its criteria for inclusion in its gifted program, uses a group-administered test with a strict score cutoff to screen for intellectual giftedness in conjunction with achievement-test scores (Ferrick, 2015). While this method is better than no method at all, an identification strategy that focuses primarily on test scores rather than qualitative criteria is intrinsically inequitable and runs the risk of inadvertently excluding students from underrepresented groups.

Academic assessment is similar to quantitative assessment in that it identifies students' capabilities based on seemingly objective measures, though in this case schools

and districts use school grades instead of intelligence-test scores. In Massachusetts, academic assessment is the second most common form of identification used in school districts (DESE, 2017).

Qualitative measurement is useful for both creatively and intellectually gifted students. This form of identification is based on observing the ways students engage with information and reviewing students' portfolios of work, their speech patterns, their interests in academic subjects, and other signs of high intelligence or creativity. For example, the late Annemarie Roeper, a leader in gifted education, developed a comprehensive assessment designed to identify the qualitative traits associated with intellectual giftedness; while the Roeper assessment is not an IQ or achievement test, the results correlate with quantitative measures (Silverman, 2013). For students who show signs of advanced intellectual or creative ability but may not be identified with traditional testing because of a disability, a language barrier, or other intervening factor, qualitative assessment is crucial to ensure that these students receive an education that matches their skills, interests, and abilities. The G&T identification process should therefore consist of multiple factors rather than of evaluations based solely or primarily on IQ scores, classroom grades, or achievement-test results alone, especially for students with disabilities, Black or Latino students, or ones who are more creatively gifted than intellectually gifted.

Parents, teachers, and school administrators can also **nominate students** for differentiated instruction if they have observed signs of high intellectual or creative ability (Silverman, 2013). Students themselves may ask for consideration, especially if they are older and are aware of their differences from the general student population. While any such nomination should be followed with more systematic observations, testing, and interviews, this is still a useful first step to identify G&T students. Teachers should note, however, that well-behaved, high-achieving students are not the only possible candidates for gifted and talented education, especially given that some students may lose interest in the general curriculum and express that disinterest by misbehaving in class or neglecting to complete

assignments (Ferrick, 2015; Silverman, 2013). Parent and self-nomination are less common in Massachusetts schools than teacher nomination; teacher nomination is the most common method by which schools and districts identify academically gifted students (DESE, 2017).

Good assessment of G&T students necessitates a combination of qualitative and quantitative assessment to ensure that schools are able to identify the students who will benefit from acceleration, enrichment, and other forms of gifted programming. *Schools should not disqualify students for G&T students based on a single criterion.*

Services for G&T students

Some options that schools can use to provide G&T students an appropriate education include acceleration, enrichment, and schools dedicated to teaching G&T students.

Acceleration comprises a number of practices schools can use to provide additional academic challenges. Because of its academic focus, it is primarily helpful for intellectually gifted students who need additional academic challenges; a school without intensive art or music classes will not meet a G&T student's needs without adding more courses or busing them to another school within the district that offers the relevant classes. Students talented in a specific subject, like math or English, can do work designed for students in a higher grade (Southern & Jones, in Assouline et al. 2015). There are multiple ways in which a school can provide subject acceleration; for example, a student can study with students in a higher grade, take college classes while still enrolled in high school, or study more advanced material while continuing to work in their grade-level classroom. A further option is full-grade acceleration—grade-skipping or early admission into kindergarten or first grade (Southern & Jones, in Assouline et al., 2015). There is also radical acceleration, in which students skip two or more grades at once (Southern & Jones, in Assouline et al., 2015). Acceleration can also be a low- or no-cost solution that may actually save schools money if a student advances through the curriculum more quickly than their peers by skipping grades (Woods, 2016; Clinkenbeard, 2007). There is the risk, however, that full-grade accelerants may experience gaps in their knowledge if they have not covered material required for classes in

higher education. There may also be concerns that acceleration may disrupt students' social development, especially if a high-ability student also has a disability that affects their social maturity. Students who are advanced in a single area may not benefit from full-grade acceleration.

In- and out-of-school enrichment, or grouping strategies, can be beneficial for both intellectually and creatively gifted students (Woods, 2016). Unlike acceleration, which modifies the general curriculum, enrichment serves as a supplement to the general curriculum if a school does not combine it with acceleration. Pull-out enrichment without acceleration is the most beneficial for students who may not need radical changes to the general curriculum in order to thrive. While in-school enrichment can certainly provide more opportunities for intellectual and creative expression for G&T students, it requires specific funding, making it less feasible if school districts do not have money on hand to cover these services. If there is enough funding at some, but not all, sites within a school district, schools may be able to combine their resources and bus G&T students from multiple schools to a single site in which G&T students participate in pull-out programming. Additionally, if schools deliver in-school enrichment in the form of tracking, there is the risk that inequitable treatment of low-income, Black, and Latino students may occur if they are misidentified as poor students because of harmful racist and classist stereotypes (Woods, 2016). Another form of enrichment can take place online. Websites like *Khan Academy* and *The Art of Problem Solving* provide mathematics instruction at multiple levels, available to anyone with a computer, tablet, or smartphone with an internet connection. Numerous YouTube users post instructional videos on topics as diverse as music theory, art history, and calculus. DESE, school districts, or individual schools can create low- or no-cost enrichment programs that rely on online tools for self-directed learning by G&T students.

Finally, G&T students may also benefit from attending **schools designed specifically for the needs of students with strong intellectual or creative talents**; these schools are often called “magnet schools” (Woods, 2016). The Massachusetts Academy of Math and Science, for example, is geared toward students with a strong aptitude for, and interest in, science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (Chester, 2017). Attending a school that directs its resources toward fostering students’ talents can provide them with both an education that dovetails well with their intellectual or creative interests and a community of students who share their passion for their preferred subjects. There are, however, some drawbacks worth considering. Low-income parents may not be able to afford to transport their children to a magnet school if it is not reasonably accessible to them by car or public transportation. Students with a wider range of interests may not want to attend a school that focuses on one subject or a set of related subjects. School districts may not be able to afford to add a new school.

Potential Policies to Systematize Massachusetts Gifted and Talented Education

Option 1: Amending state law to require G&T services

One option to ensure that Massachusetts schools adopt a systematic attitude toward providing gifted and talented education may be through statewide legislation modifying the Education Reform Act to include language referring specifically to the needs of gifted and talented students and methods school districts can use to identify them and meet their unique educational needs (Ferrick, 2015). Ferrick (2015) provides a template of a sample law the Commonwealth can enact that defines the target population and designates G&T students as a population requiring educational support:

A school-aged child, as defined by Mass. Gen. Laws 71B § 1, who demonstrates outstanding levels of aptitude or competence in one or more domains, when compared to his or her chronological peers in the local school district, as identified by professionally qualified persons.

Domains may include intellectual, artistic, creative, or musical capacity, or in specific academic fields. Gifted students possess intellectual abilities and potential for achievement so outstanding that the child's educational performance is adversely affected by the general curriculum.

The National Association for Gifted Children has also produced some sample guidelines for legislation to ensure equitable identification of gifted and talented students, especially those students who come from underrepresented racial or socioeconomic groups (Knudsen, 2018). Under this guidance, school districts must have systematic policies in place to identify and serve gifted students. They must use multiple criteria based on local norms, and no individual criterion should disqualify a student on its own. Furthermore, this potential legislation would require DESE to provide training for teachers and school administrators to identify and serve G&T students, share information on best practices with individual schools and districts, ensure that school districts comply with the stipulations delineated in this legislation, and provide technical assistance to school districts to ensure that gifted and talented students receive the education and support they need (Knudsen, 2018). DESE could advocate for a law that combines the criteria that Ferrick (2015) and Knudsen (2018) have outlined. This legislation should also include stipulations for a line item in the state budget to cover gifted education, as was the case in Massachusetts before 2002 (Chester, 2017; Woods, 2016).

Benefits. Legislation would create a definitive duty for school districts to create and implement G&T policy according to clearly stated rules. It creates a concrete, enforceable baseline by which schools can define their G&T programming; if there is a legal requirement for all Massachusetts schools to provide G&T services, then there is a disincentive for school districts to shirk their responsibilities by refusing to provide such services for this population of students. Moreover, it can indicate precisely what penalties a school district can incur if it does not comply with the criteria outlined in the law. There is less room for ambiguity in how they interpret the law if it is worded clearly.

Feasibility and implementation problems. While legislation seems more permanent than DESE- or district-level regulations or guidelines, the vagaries of politics can exert an influence on the continuing existence of such laws. Backlash can lead state legislators to move toward repealing the statute. Furthermore, compared to district-level solutions and non-binding regulations, formal legislation is more difficult to create, pass, and implement. Legislation can take an inordinate amount of time; creating good legislation involves lobbying politicians, currying influence among lobbyists and activist groups, waiting for bills to be deliberated by legislative committees and subcommittees, and ensuring that the Governor is willing to sign the bill into law. Moreover, in a political climate in which elected officials are scrambling to maintain current levels of service provision in the face of federal opposition and statewide budget cuts to essential services, it may be a less appealing undertaking to focus energy on a bill affecting a small portion of Massachusetts students. Finally, there is the additional risk that legislation requiring G&T programming and services for schools may not include provisions for funding. An unfunded gifted mandate would be no better than the current situation; schools would be required to provide a service for which they have no funds. While better-funded schools in well-heeled communities might be able to allocate funds toward G&T identification, programming, and advocacy, this would not be the case for lower-income schools whose students are primarily from marginalized communities. Allowing gifted and talented education to be associated with students' socioeconomic status would merely exacerbate the "gifted gap" in Massachusetts public schools and compound pre-existing race and class disparities.

Option 2: Non-binding DESE rubric for G&T identification and service

Instead of passing statewide legislation mandating G&T instruction, DESE could create a set of regulations outlining districts' responsibilities in educating G&T students who would benefit from differentiated instruction beyond what the general-education classroom can provide. This set of regulations could take the form of a comprehensive rubric

that clearly defines the population requiring additional educational support, the means by which schools and districts can identify people needing said support, and the methods by which schools and districts can serve G&T students. DESE could also create a mechanism for ensuring that districts remain in compliance through periodical check-ins. To test the efficacy of this new rubric, DESE could implement a pilot program that requires some school districts to adhere to it and collect both qualitative and quantitative data like interviews, analysis of student performance, and parent questionnaires. After a number of schools have tested the rubric, DESE could introduce it statewide. These guidelines should be based on best practices for identifying and serving G&T students. These practices include universal screening, inclusive assessment guidelines, gifted IEPs or other educational plans, and protocols for acceleration.

First, DESE should establish a **universal screening policy** combining classroom observation, parent nomination, and standardized testing that ensures that gifted students are identified as a population of students requiring specialized instruction (Yaluma & Tyner, 2018; Woods, 2016). Universal screening makes it easier to identify students from underrepresented groups as gifted and talented (Woods, 2016; Yaluma & Tyner, 2018).

Gifted and Talented Identification and Service Rubric



Second, DESE should create **guidelines for assessing G&T students** based on a combination of qualitative and quantitative factors. Using a wide variety of criteria, like grades, achievement tests, teacher observations, parent nominations, cognitive testing, portfolio reviews, and interviews, allows schools to identify students in need of educational support who may be missed if districts only use one method (Woods, 2016). In particular, school districts should not use IQ scores, standardized-test results, or classroom grades as the sole criteria for determining eligibility. DESE must develop these guidelines in a way that ensures that selection criteria do not discriminate against G&T students from underrepresented communities, like students with disabilities, low-income students, students who are still learning English, and Black and Latino students. Third, DESE's rubric should include policies for accelerating students. Even if a school district cannot afford specialized pull-out programming, it can still accelerate G&T students and provide them with material that goes beyond the topics covered in the general curriculum for those students' age groups. DESE can refer to the University of Iowa's *A Nation Empowered* report, which outlines several methods by which schools can accelerate students and create acceleration policies to systematize the process (Assouline et al, 2015). Fourth, DESE should institute a policy of issuing G&T students a Gifted IEP, similar to Pennsylvania's system. Like the IEPs issued to students with disabilities, the Gifted IEP can specify the services an intellectually gifted or creatively talented student needs to achieve in the classroom and beyond (Ferrick, 2015). Like the rubric itself, a clear plan for each gifted and talented student's education will help ensure that teachers and school administrators have a concrete, understandable set of goals to help further their intellectual and creative development. For students with disabilities, educational needs related to their intellectual or creative talents can be included on this plan in addition to the accommodations required for their disabilities. Finally, DESE should advocate for funding for gifted and talented education on both the state and district levels to ensure that a wider array of options is available to G&T students throughout Massachusetts.

Benefits. If DESE introduces these reforms without going through the often arduous process of pursuing official legislation, it can move more quickly toward ensuring that school districts can provide G&T students with the educational supports they need. Establishing a centralized rubric from DESE is also more efficient than having every district create and maintain its own standards for gifted and talented education, since districts would be able to draw their policies from DESE's rubric instead of working from scratch to develop their own protocols for identifying and serving G&T students.

Feasibility and implementation problems. Unlike formal legislation, DESE regulations are not binding in the same way. Schools and school districts may be able to dodge these regulations and have more interpretive leeway to reduce or eliminate services designated for gifted and talented students. Districts may also adopt or continue to use inequitable methods of assessment and identification that unfairly exclude students from underrepresented groups from participation in G&T programming with less oversight than a state law would provide if DESE does not enforce compliance with the new guidelines.

Option 3: Non-binding district rubrics for G&T identification and service

The third option is for districts themselves to create their own guidelines for gifted and talented education and create informal agreements between district officials. Individual districts could use the guidelines suggested for DESE, though they would of course apply specifically to individual districts rather than Massachusetts as a whole.

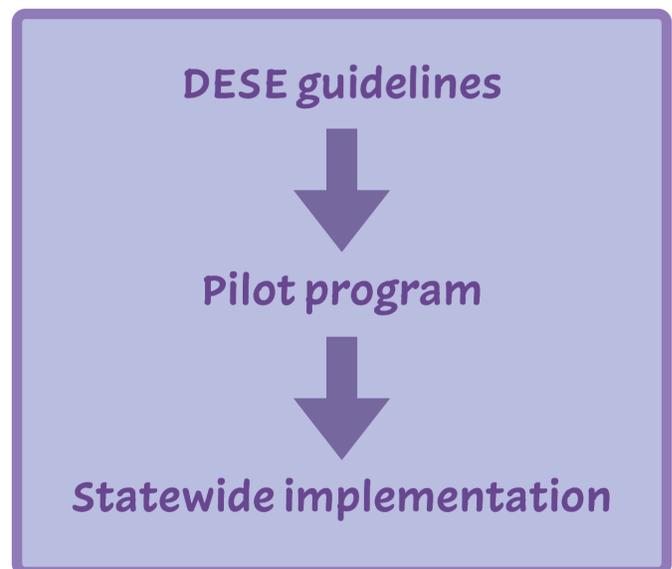
Benefits. The advantage to this approach is that districts have more latitude to assess the needs of their own local populations. They would also be able to adopt new regulations without waiting for statewide legislation to pass, or for DESE to create and implement a set of statewide guidelines. For example, if the leadership of Somerville Public Schools wanted to create their own gifted program, they could develop their own guidelines tailored to the needs of students in Somerville who need gifted and talented education. If they wanted to

collaborate with schools from Boston Public Schools or another district, they could develop intra-district agreements to ensure relative parity between both districts' guidelines.

Feasibility and implementation problems. If districts cannot agree on standards, however, there is a risk that leaving implementation and design to local education authorities may not alleviate the current fragmentation in Massachusetts G&T policy, or even exacerbate the problem. It is also less efficient than using a centralized source for guidelines like DESE, the Massachusetts Legislature or the federal government; every school district would have to develop its own criteria and policies for identifying G&T students and providing them with educational services. Schools may also adopt criteria for inclusion in G&T programs that are relatively inequitable; unlike Options 1 and 2, the Massachusetts government would have less authority to ensure that each district implements an inclusive set of criteria to identify and serve G&T students. Moreover, disparities in school funding will also affect the ability of individual schools and school districts to provide educational supports for gifted and talented students beyond acceleration or out-of-school enrichment via the internet.

Policy Recommendations

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education should use Option 2 and create a comprehensive rubric by which schools can identify gifted and talented students and provide them a free and appropriate education, drawing from the models reflected in research on gifted and talented education and methods used successfully in other states. DESE should root this rubric in principles of equity, inclusion, and a free



and appropriate education for students whose intellectual or creative abilities necessitate differentiated instruction. Initially, DESE should issue non-binding, but strongly encouraged, guidance for assessment, identification, and educational support of gifted and talented students. Implementation could begin with a pilot program in a few districts, followed by statewide adoption. If this rubric is successful in ensuring a systematic approach to identifying and serving gifted and talented students, then DESE can support efforts to codify these policies into law through a funded mandate. Requiring schools to demonstrate their commitment to this approach before enshrining these standards into law will ensure that DESE, and the Massachusetts government generally, has clear evidence showing that these policies are effective. These solutions must be as flexible and as individualized as possible; no one policy solution will suit every high-ability student. That said, however, these recommendations should at the very least ensure that there is some provision for G&T students in all Massachusetts schools so that they can develop their intellectual and creative talents for their own benefit and that of society at large. Adopting a systematic approach to G&T identification and service will help move Massachusetts toward fostering brilliance.

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